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ABSTRACT

In order to study whether sex as a reading-interest determinant has lessened as the women's movement has strengthened, the reading interests of 161 first-grade and second-grade girls and boys were studied by conducting one-to-one interviews with the children in Glen Cove, New York, in the spring of 1976. Answers were tabulated in seven categories. Results were compared to earlier studies conducted in the same manner in 1972 in 13 schools in the United States and in 9 foreign countries, when significant differences were found between boys' and girls' interests in the United States but not in the other countries. Although first-grade boys and girls in the spring of 1976 expressed significant differences in category preferences, the results are less pronounced than in the previous studies. Analysis of second-grade category preferences by sex in 1976 showed no significant differences between boys and girls. Fiction categories were most popular at both grade levels for both boys and girls. The second most popular categories were current (1970s) information for boys and scientific information for girls. Implications for instruction are discussed and sources of interest are noted. (MKM)

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SEXISM AT SIX AND SEVEN--AS REFLECTED IN THE
READING INTERESTS OF THE VERY YOUNG

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If reading interests are indeed a sort of double mirror--reflecting both the child's own personality and the drift of the times, the question must arise: has Women's Lib, with its huge groundswell in interest and publicity, affected the reading interests of the very young?

Researchers, from Jordan (1921) to Stanchfield (1962) have agreed that sex sharply differentiates reading interests. Whether this is an innate, biological difference or a difference fostered by our culture and heightened by our schools, has often been conjectured. This writer conducted several studies involving the reading interests of first and second grade children. During the Spring of 1972, the expressed reading interests of 1,078 first and second grade children in twelve

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public schools located in three population centers of the United States were tabulated (Kirsch, 1975). This study was expanded during the Fall of 1972, with the interviewing of an additional thousand children in nine countries throughout the world (Kirsch, Pehrsson, and Robinson, 1976). Another study was conducted during the Spring of 1974 with eighty-two first grade children in an elementary school in Glen Cove, New York as the subjects (Kirsch, 1974). In all investigations, interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. The children's own drawings were used to elicit their expressed interests. Children were asked to draw a picture about what they would best like to read or have read to them. Each child, interviewed alone, would then draw a picture. The investigator confirmed the child's reading interest by means of a structured interview. When possible, the derivation of the interest was also elicited.

After the data had been collected, comparisons were made according to a number of variables, with sex of the child an important factor. Statistical compilations were made through the use of Chi-Square. In all sections of the United States (and in Glen Cove in the 1974 tabulations), the reading interests of boys and girls in both first and second grades, when tabulated according to sex, differed significantly ($p < .01$). However, when considering the nine countries in other parts of the world (Austria, Canada, England, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Republic of Panama, and Sweden), Chi-Square showed no significant differences in the proportion of responses of either first year or second year boys and girls.

The statistical compilations were made through the use of seven prearranged interest categories, arrived at through consultations with teachers and librarians, and tested with pilot studies. The categories included: (1) Information Scientific; (2) Information Historic; (3) Information 1970s; (4) Realistic Fiction; (5) Imaginative Fiction; (6) Humor; and (7) Poetry. "Poetry" was probably too abstract a designation for this age group and was not chosen by any child. In general, girls in the United States showed a far greater proportion of interest in both Realistic and Imaginative Fiction than did boys, while boys showed a far greater interest in Information 1970s. However, in the nine countries throughout the world, boys and girls similarly showed a greater proportion of interest in both fiction categories--realistic and imaginative. There is apparently no "hard" research to account for this facet of reading interests in other countries. One can hypothesize: possibly very young children in these countries are treated more categorically as "little children" rather than as "little boys" and "little girls." Fairy tales appear to be more prevalent as reading fare in the nine countries in both trade books and school readers than is customary in the United States.

In general, it must be noted that there were far more similarities in reading interests of young children throughout the world than there were differences: fairy tales and fantasies are the most preferred expressed reading interests of first and second year children in the ten countries. The proportion of interest does differ, however.

1976 GLEN COVE STUDY

An additional study was conducted during the Spring of 1976. Subjects were 161 first and second grade boys and girls who were students at the same elementary school in Glen Cove, New York, used in previous studies. Only a single variable--the sex of the subject--was tested. The underlying purpose of the study was to probe as to whether sex as a reading interest determinant had lessened. The same techniques for acquiring data (the child's own drawing together with a one-to-one interview) and compilation of results (Chi-Square based upon prearranged categories) was used. Breakdown of the population included: first grade boys, 45; first grade girls, 40; second grade boys, 43; second grade girls, 33.

Results of analysis of first grade preferences as differentiated by sex are shown in Table One on page 5. Second grade statistics are demonstrated in Table Two, on page 5.

Analysis of First Grade Preferences

First grade boys and girls in the Spring of 1976 in the Glen Cove school expressed significant differences in category preferences. A Chi-Square analysis disclosed significant differences at the five per cent level ($p < .05$). These results are less significant than in the previous studies noted where Chi-Square showed significant differences at the one per cent level ($p < .01$). First grade girls, according to this study, now showed a greater proportion of interest in general scientific information, a greater interest than did

Table 1

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Frequency of First Grade Category Preferences
as Differentiated by Sex
Glen Cove, New York 1976

Categories	Boys		Girls	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Information Scientific	8	17.79	12	30
Information Historic	5	11.11	--	--
Information 1970s	11	24.44	3	7.5
Realistic Fiction	6	13.33	10	25
Imaginative Fiction	14	31.11	15	37.50
Humor	1	2.22	--	--
Poetry	--	--	--	--
Total	45	100	40	100

Note: Chi-Square = 12.1538 $p < .05$

Table 2

Frequency of Second Grade Category Preferences
as Differentiated by Sex
Glen Cove, New York 1976

Categories	Boys		Girls	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Information Scientific	6	13.96	7	21.21
Information Historic	2	4.65	--	--
Information 1970s	14	32.57	5	15.15
Realistic Fiction	10	23.25	13	39.40
Imaginative Fiction	10	23.25	8	24.24
Humor	1	2.32	--	--
Poetry	--	--	--	--
Total	43	100	33	100

Note: Chi-Square = 6.754 $p > .05$

boys in realistic fiction, and a very slightly more pronounced interest in imaginative fiction. Boys continued, as in past studies, to show a considerably greater interest in current information (Information 1970s). Differences throughout, as evidenced by the Chi-Square, were less pronounced than in previous United States studies.

Analysis of Second Grade Preferences

Chi-Square analysis of second grade category preferences by sex showed no significant differences in choices between boys and girls ($p > .05$). All previous United States studies had shown statistical differences at the one per cent level ($p < .01$) between the reading interest choices of second grade boys and girls. Analysis of the category preferences indicates that girls showed a greater preference for general scientific knowledge than did boys and a greater preference for realistic fiction. While boys still exhibited a greater interest in reading about current information (Information 1970s), the degree of difference was less than in previous studies. Preference for imaginative fiction was almost identical for second grade boys and girls.

Topics Chosen by First Grade Students

"Categories," as used in these studies, are broad classifications used for statistical analysis. Within the categories are the actual topics children indicated they wanted to read about or have read to them. Topics are not broken down by sex.

The 85 first grade children made 86 choices; one child expressed two interests. The choices clustered into 17 general topics, which are ranked in order of preference. Each under-scored heading is the general topic and it is followed by the specific topic in which the children expressed interest. The parenthesis indicates the number of children who preferred the topic.

Information on animals (20). Cats and dogs (10); circus and zoo animals (4); horses and ponies (3); ducks (3).

Imaginative fiction (fairy tales) (12). Snow White (2); Wizard of Oz (1); Peter Pan (1); Bambi (1); Pinocchio (1); King Midas (1); ~~Peter~~ and the Wolf (1); Cat in the Hat (1); Cinderella (1); Raggedy Ann (1); Little Red Riding Hood (1).

Stories about people (8). Mommy and Daddy (5); unspecified people (2); grown-up stories about love and marriage (1).

TV cartoons (8). Donald Duck (3); Mickey Mouse (2); Popeye (1); Frosty, the Snowman (1); Rudolf, the Red-Nosed Reindeer (1).

Stories about children (6). Children and Santa Claus (2); boys and girls (2); him/herself (2).

Information on sports (6). Baseball (3); swimming (1); hockey (1); unspecified sports (1).

Monster stories (5). Unspecified (3); Gadjilla (1); King Kong (1).

How to make and/or operate vehicles, mechanical objects, etc. (4). Racing cars (2); trucks (2).

Prehistoric life (3). Dinosaurs (3).

Historic events and famous people (2). Bible stories (1); George Washington (1).

Mysteries and ghosts (2). Mysteries (1); ghosts (1).

Talking animals (2). Talking cat (1); talking duck (1).

Stories about real animals (2). Sharks (2).

"How to" information, other than mechanical (2). How to build apartment houses (1); how to build a cabin (1).

Information on space (2). Rockets (1); space (1).

Chemical and/or biological information (1). How the body works (1).

Funny stories (1). Joke books (1).

The first four topics selected by first grade children were the same as those chosen as the first four topics in other studies, although the order of preference differed. There was, in this group of children, apparently an even greater interest in information on animals than exhibited by other first graders.

Topics Chosen by Second Grade Students

The 76 second grade students made 77 choices, with one child making two choices. The choices clustered into 20 logical topics, which are ranked in order of preference.

Imaginative Fiction (fairy tales) (12). Three Little Pigs (3); Three Bears (3); Peter Pan (1); Fairy Godmother (1); Lazy Jack (1); Jack and Jill (1); Hansel and Gretel (1); Talking doll (1).

Information on animals (12). Dogs (3); zoo animals (2); snakes (1); whales (1); horses (1); polar bears (1); turtles (1); sharks (1); rabbits (1).

Stories about children (10). Himself/herself (3); brothers and sisters (2); friends (1); children (1); children at school (1); children and Christmas (1); girls (1).

Stories about real animals (8). Dogs (3); zoo animals (2); horses (1); jungle animals (1); unspecified animals (1).

Information on vocations (7). Army (1); how to draw people (1); model (1); Marine (1); psychiatrist (1); movie star (1); violinist (1).

Monster stories (4). Gadzilla (2); Superman (1); King Kong (1).

Information on sports (3). Basketball (2); football (1).

How to make and/or operate vehicles, mechanical objects, etc. (3). Go-carts (1); jets (1); trains (1).

Real-life adventure stories (3). Circus (1); boys and robbers (1); boys looking for treasure (1).

"How to" information, other than mechanical (2). Climb mountains (1); collect coins (1).

Chemical and/or biological information (2). Volcanoes (1); metals (1).

Stories about people (2). Unspecified people (1); people and cars (1).

Current events (2). People throughout the world (1); helping poor people (1).

Talking animals (1). Talking dog (1).

TV cartoons (1). Jerry and the Cat (1).

How to grow things (1). How to grow plants (1).

Information on space (1). Rockets (1).

Funny stories (1). Comic books (1).

Historic events and famous people (1). George Washington and the Revolutionary War (1).

Prehistoric life (1). Dinosaurs (1).

Second grade children chose four topics not mentioned by first graders: information on vocations; real life adventure stories, how to grow things, and current events. Conversely, first graders chose one topic not mentioned by second graders: mysteries and ghosts. The first three topics had received the greatest proportion of interest in other studies, although the ranking was slightly different. Fairy tales evoked even more interest than in other investigations. Interest in TV cartoons showed an appreciable drop in second grade.

Derivation of Interest

As in similar studies conducted by this researcher, children were asked, in the course of the interview, if they could tell what made them interested in the topic they chose. Interest derivations for first grade students are shown in Table 3, page 11; second grade students' interest derivations are presented in Table 4, page 12. In comparison with previous studies, there is apparently more reading interest derived from books, more from personal experiences, and less

Table 3

Expressed Derivation of Interest: First Grade

Glen Cove, New York 1976

	Books	TV	Movies	Kits	Experience	Unknown	Total
Information Scientific	3	3	2	-	14*	-	20
Information Historic	3	1	-	-	1**	-	5
Information 1970s	2	4	-	-	8	-	14
Realistic Fiction	-	-	2	-	14	-	16
Imaginative Fiction	14	10	1	-	1	1	27
Humor	1	-	-	2	-	-	3
Poetry	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total Number	23	18	3	2	38	1	85
Total Per cent	27.06	21.18	3.53	2.35	44.70	1.18	100
Note:	* Pets 9	** Museum visit					
	Trips 4						

Table 4
Expressed Derivation of Interest: Second Grade
Glen Cove, New York 1976

	Books	TV	Movies	Kits	Experience	Unknown	Total
Information Scientific	3	4	-	-	5	1	13
Information Historic	1	-	-	-	1	-	2
Information 1970s	5	1	-	-	13*	-	19
Realistic Fiction	4	1	-	-	15**	3	23
Imaginative Fiction	10	5	1	-	-	2	18
Humor	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Poetry	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total Number	23	12	1	-	34	6	76
Total Per cent	30.26	15.79	1.32	-	44.74	7.89	100
Note: * Father's Occupation or Hobby ** Trips, pets							

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from television. The percentage of children who could not denote the source of interest was small.

In comparing first and second grade children in this group, books as an interest source increased in second grade, while TV decreased. Personal experience was the most important interest source in both first and second grades.

Results

This study is extremely limited in design and scope. The drawings and interviews are essentially a subjective technique, and only 161 boys and girls, from a single location, were used as subjects.

Nevertheless, the statistical data appeared to be at variance with data collected by this writer during the past four years in thirteen similar situations throughout the United States. Perhaps the great differences in reading interests between boys and girls in first and second grade have lessened. Perhaps boys are becoming more interested in reading various kinds of fiction and girls are turning to factual reading. In this study, apparently the reading interests of young boys and girls were similar; in second grade, the similarity appeared to be so great that there were no statistically significant differences between the reading interests of boys and girls. This profile was close to that which emerged from the study previously noted--involving nine countries throughout the world.

Another finding was a slight decrease in the import of television as a source of reading interests; a pronounced

increase in the import of personal experiences; and an increase in reading interests attributable directly to books. All these trends were more apparent with second grade children than with first graders.

Why?

If the reading interests of young boys and girls are becoming more similar, what are the causal factors? We can only conjecture:

1. The publicity explosion on women's rights has reached into the home of the young child. Parents may be more perceptive as to equalizing stimuli--fire engines for little girls as well as for small boys, and toy stores for little boys as well as for their sisters.

2. Basal reading materials for young children have been revised. The reading series prevalent in the '60s (and long before) were horrifyingly sexist, with their stories of achieving males and housebound females. As Fishman (1976) states, new studies on current materials have yet to be published. This report does not purport to make a detailed search. But in looking at a single series (Macmillan Series r, 1975), in the early levels, we find:

- a. a story about a lady bus driver
- b. a story about a man who liked everything in
the right place in his house
- c. a story about two girls outwitting a boy in
a game
- d. a picture of grandma riding a two-wheeler
and having a catch

- e. a picture of a boy and his father cooking eggs
for lunch
- f. a picture of a male teacher in a primary grade
- g. a picture of a woman, in charge at the animal
shelter
- h. a picture of a woman on a ladder rescuing a
treed cat
- i. a picture of a girl raking leaves with her father
- j. a picture of a mother playing baseball with her
children
- k. a picture of a girl unloading a truck
- l. a picture of a woman fishing from a pier
- m. instructions and pictures of boys making puppets
- n. a picture of a crew of a ship which included girls
- o. a picture of a man shopping in a supermarket
- p. a short paragraph and a picture about a woman
scientist (interesting, especially because it
was constructed to introduce the word scientist)
- q. a picture of a woman at work in an office--
obviously an executive
- r. many fairy tales and fantasies
- s. some factual information, particularly about
animals

3. Trade books are available for the primary-age child which view the roles of girls and boys as interchangeable. Included are such stories as:

- a. Noisy Nancy Morris--a story about a boisterous girl inventor
- b. Clever Molly and the Stupid Wolf--girl outwits wolf
- c. A Train for Jane--girl wants a train for Christmas, not a doll
- d. Fire Girl--Brenda wants to be a firefighter
- e. Nothing But a Dog--story of a young girl who climbs, builds, etc.
- f. The Dragon and the Doctor--she's the doctor; her brother the nurse

4. Nonprint media gives daily evidence of the changing role of women:

- a. TV series showing women in alternate roles--
"Bionic Woman," "Wonder Woman," "Police Woman"
- b. Women visible on TV in the news--female newscasters, female talk show directors, female drama critics, woman as convention keynote speaker, women political delegates

5. A changing vocabulary is evidence of a less sexist America:

- a. Such words as chairperson, salesperson, firefighter, office person have quickly become part of our vocabulary.

Conclusions

Results of a study of reading interests of 182 first and second grade children in one locality appear to indicate a greater commonality of interests between boys and girls than was apparent in previous studies. There was a greater difference between the reading interests of first grade boys and girls ($p < .05$) than between second grade boys and girls ($p > .05$).

Possibly, this commonality may be attributed to the awareness of a need for equality in the treatment of young boys and girls, engendered by the Women's Liberation Movement.

Print and nonprint media, as well as changed attitudes of adults, could account for the development of commonality of reading interests. Second graders, because of a greater awareness of the media, may be more affected by changed attitudes than first grade children.

An ancillary finding seemed to indicate a lessening of television as an influence on reading interests and an increase in the importance of books and personal experiences.

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